Enduring Mystery of the Ouija Board Reincarnation

Who Is Patience Worth? Did She Ever Exist? Are Mrs. Curran and She One and the Same Person?

By Ishbel M. Ross

THE strange case of Patience Worth and her supposed communications with this world has excited more than ordinary interest since Mrs. John H. Curran, of St. Louis, came to New York two weeks ago with her ouija board. Her public meetings at the home of Mrs. Herman Behr, 188 East Sixty-sixth Street, have been attended by scientists, psychologists, writers and experts of various kinds, who profess to be baffled by the writings of Pa- to be baffled by the writings of Patience, presumed to have been dead 350 years. To some she has become a jest. Others have swallowed wholesale the story of her origin and her persistent communications to this world through Mrs. Curran and the ouija board. A specialized minority are reserving judgment. The psychologists are numbered among the latter.

Who is Patience Worth?

Did she ever exist?

Are Mrs. Curran and she the same person?

The psychologist who has had the fullest opportunity to study the phenomenon had a comprehensive survey of his conclusions in a recent issue of "The American Psychological Review." He is Professor Charles E. Cory, of Washington University, St. Louis. He does not believe that Patience ever lived, as she so persistently asserts, but he does admit the unconscious genius of Mrs. Curran. He expresses himself on the subject as follows:

"Mrs. Curran is an intelligent woman, but her mind is much inferior to that of Patience Worth. In short, there is a sub-conscious self far outstripping in power and range the primary consciousness. This is an indisputable fact, and it is a significant one for psychology. In some way the disassociation has resulted in the formation of a self with greatly increased calibre. It has not only given it access to a much wider range of material, but it has given it a facile creative power amounting to genius.

"Patience Worth is a personality of tremendous creative energy. And, unlike most dissociated personalities, she is morally sound. It is inconceivable that these elaborate and intricately wrought novels should not have been planned before they were so hastily written. The selves are not alternating but co-existent or co-conscious. That which is peculiar in this case is the quality of the mentality of the second self. I accept the judgment that Patience Worth is a genius of no means order.

Division of Labor

"The division of the self has resulted in a division of labor. To Mrs. Curran falls the care of the needs of the body and the needs of social life. Their reactions and distractions are hers. From all this Patience Worth is free. Between her and the entire active phase of life stands the buffer consciousness of Mrs. Curran.

"Upon one subject this mind is under an illusion. She insists that she is the discarnate spirit of an Englishwoman who lived in an age now long since passed. That she is honest in this belief there is no reason to doubt. The full history of this illusion, this idea that she is a returned spirit, can be secured only by psycho-analysis. But it is worth noting that Patience Worth made her appearance after Mrs. Curran had spent many evenings with a friend, a confirmed Spiritualist, with a view to getting a message from the spirit world. In the atmosphere of expectancy, of hope that a voice from the dead might be heard, she may be said to have been born, and it is more than possible that the idea became at that time a vital part of the dissociated self then developing. There is a sense in which her claim to be a disembodied spirit is correct. Back in the recesses of the subconscious she was born; created in an ideal world, conceived in fancy. She has fashioned herself out of the stuff of the imagination and there she remains, admitting no interests that would contradict the illusion. Such she believes and understands herself to be—an English spinster of long ago.

"Concerning an effort I made to explain her recently she addressed the following lines to me:

" 'I am molten silver running;
Let man catch me within his cup,
Let him proceed upon his labor
Smiting upon me.
Let him with cunning smite
My substance. Let him at his dream
Lending my stuff unto its creation,
It shall be none the less me.' "

Referring more particularly to Mrs. Curran, Professor Cory says:

"The case is one upon which no satisfactory report can be made without the aid of hypnosis. Anything like a real explanation of the problems to be solved requires data that can be obtained in no other way. These problems are: (1) subconscious memory and perception; (2) subconscious thought. Hypnosis has been refused because of a fear that it might injure or destroy the ability to write and not, I believe, through the desire to avoid a thorough investigation. Most of the literature of Patience Worth is conceded by critics to be of a high order.

Reservoir of Knowledge

"Mrs. Curran is very intelligent. Her quick, intuitive understanding is recognized by all who know her well. A conversation with her, however, though based upon an extended acquaintance, does not give the impression that one is in the presence of the mind that wrote 'The Sorry Tale.' Only a reading of the million and a half words that have been written can give an adequate idea of the great reservoir of knowledge that is accessible to this secondary personality. A careful survey of Mrs. Curran's reading from childhood leaves the problem of its source largely unsolved. Most significant to me is the bearing which the case has upon the problem of subconscious reflection processes. It offers a new answer to the question that is of growing interest, What degree of rationality may the processes of a subconscious center attain? Here there is a product showing a mentality of a very high order. It is original, creative, possessing a delicate sense of beauty, a hardy rationality, and, above all, and perhaps most surprising, a moral and spiritual elevation. Patience Worth easily meets most tests that are applied to the normal personal consciousness. In conversation she displays a quickness of insight, a readiness of repartee that enable her to hold her own in the company of the learned."

The story of how Patience Worth is supposed first to have communicated with Mrs. Curran is told by Caspar S. Yost, editor of "The St. Louis Globe-Democrat," in a book called "Patience Worth." Mrs. Curran and Emily Grant Hutchings, wife of the secretary of the Tower Grove Park Board, were sitting over the ouija board in July, 1913, when a message is said to have come in this form:

"Many moons ago I lived. Again I come. Patience Worth is my name. Wait! I would speak with thee. If thou shalt live, then so shall I. I make my bread by thy hearth. Good friends, let us be merrie. The time for work is past. Let the tabbie drowse and blink her wisdom to the firelog. Good mother wisdom is too harsh for thee and thou shouldst love her only as a foster mother."

When Mrs. Curran asked her more about herself the following words were quickly spelled out on the ouija board: "About me thou wouldst know much. Yesterday is dead. Let thy mind rest as to the past."

According to Mr. Yost she never refers to any event taking place in the world now or that has taken place in the past. Yet she was supposed to indite Armistice Day and Red Cross poems during the last two weeks.

Talks in Old English

"She speaks an archaic tongue that is like the English language of the time of the Stuarts, which contains elements of even older usage," says Mr. Yost. "Almost all of her words are of pure Anglo-Saxon-Norman origin. There is seldom a word of direct Latin or Greek parentage. All her knowledge of material things seems to be drawn from English association. She is familiar with the trees, flowers, birds and beasts of England. There are also indications of a knowledge of New England life. Yet she has never admitted residing in England, or New England, or anywhere. Her conversation is strewn with wit and wisdom, epigrams and maxims; poems by the hundred, parables and allegories, stories of a semi-dramatic character and dramas. Most of her poetry is iambic blank verse in lines of irregular length."

On another occasion she explained herself thus, according to Mr. Yost: "I be like to the wind, and yea, like to it do blow me ever, yea, since time. Do ye tether me unto to-day I blow me then unto to-morrow.

"Am I a broken lyre
Who at the master's touch
Respondeth with a tinkle and a whirr?
Or am I strung in full
And at his touch give forth the full chord?"

Mrs. Curran personally is an attractive woman of vivacious temperament. She taught singing and music before her marriage. Now a great deal of her time is occupied with the voluminous writings of Patience. In the last six years she has written 1,500,000 words, including six novels. She dictates rapidly while her husband takes down the material in longhand. It is never revised, but is presumed to be the finished product as it comes. It is no unusual thing for 2,000 words to be run off within the course of an hour and a half. Mrs. Curran says she regards the work of Patience as a holy thing and treats it with reverence.

"I think it is ghastly to peddle spiritual communion and play with God's angels for selfish reasons," she says. "Since Patience visited me I have come to believe there is some grain of truth in what so-called Spiritualists put forth, but for the most part I believe it to be fake. I never did put any stock in Spiritualism, and have always been a healthy, wholesome-minded individual. Patience has not made me morbid—and, believe me, there are no spooks around me."

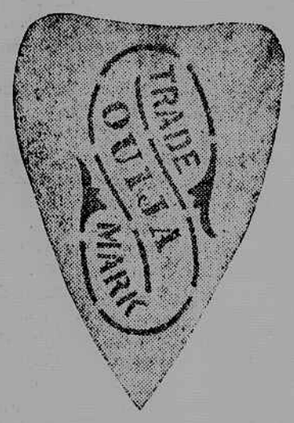
Adopts Little Patience

Mrs. Curran says she was asked by Patience Worth to adopt a "wee bit o' a babe with nothing to win its way in the world but a smile," and within the next week Providence sent a new-born infant her way. She called her Patience Worth and hung a gold cross around her neck with a ruby in the centre. She is now three years old and her foster mother says she will be brought up in wholesome fashion. She declares that Patience Worth frequently asks about the child and expresses desires as to what should be done with her.

The ouija board, while the apparent instrument for conveying the communications of Patience, has now become more a habit than a necessity with Mrs. Curran, she declares. Patience talks to her without it, but she believes the board helps her to concentrate and to keep her mind sufficiently blank. As a result of the recent Patience Worth meetings held here, there has been a rush to the stores for ouija boards. Toy manufacturers are selling them at the rate of twenty a day. The department stores are having an unusual demand for them.

The ouija board has the letters of the alphabet arranged on it in two concentric arcs, with the ten numerals below and "Yes" and "No" inscribed on the upper corners. The planchette, or pointer, is a thin, heart-shaped piece of wood provided with three legs upon which it moves about on the board, its point indicating the letters of the words it is spelling. Two persons are needed to operate it. They hold the tips of the fingers lightly on the pointer and wait. Perhaps it moves; perhaps it does not. Its powers have been attributed by some to supernatural influence; by others to subconsciousness. Scientists, for the most part, treat it with disdain.

Mrs. John H. Curran, of St. Louis, who has kept the world guessing with her strange messages from Patience Worth



Above we see a typical ouija board, and to the right is the little pointer which, under the pressure of human hands, spells out amazing communications

A Story Teller Takes to the Air

"I AM NOT a brave woman," says Mary Roberts Rinehart, the author of "Dangerous Days." And the next day she flew in the clouds above California and came down to explain her cowardice in this way: "I do a lot of things I am afraid of largely because I am afraid. I hate to feel that I cannot do what other people can."

It should be stated that "Dangerous Days" is a novel of married life, and not of Mrs. Rinehart's flying experiences. This, her latest book—a best seller—is being reproduced in motion pictures for Eminent Authors-Goldwyn. It is another example of Mrs. Rinehart's courage—that she dares enter the studio and express herself there.

"It was not that I was afraid. Not for a moment," said Mrs. Rinehart after her trip in the air.

"I was curious, interested, just a little bit inclined to patronize the plodders down below along the threadlike roads; but afraid, no!

"It is all so easy. Some highly efficient person offers you a helmet and a pair of goggles—why don't we use those helmets in our motor cars?—and a leather coat, too, large and not extremely becoming, to wear over one's riding breeches, and a photographer gets on a sort of ladder and waits to catch you crawling into—I think they call it the fuselage.

"You hope you are doing it gracefully, but the toe of your right foot catches on the pit, or whatever it is you sit on, and during a desperate struggle to release it you hear the camera click.

"Then a perfectly calm young man with a cigarette, after suggesting that you have your helmet on wrong side before, crawls into the seat in front of you and takes a squint at the sky. It develops that he is picking out a hole in the clouds to go through, precisely like locating the cup on the putting green, and from the ease with which he strikes it later it is considerably easier to hit.

"I had immediately a real feeling of confidence in that young man. After all, he liked himself as much as I did myself, and he seemed to look upon the whole thing as a mere incident, something sandwiched between breakfast and luncheon, like a marcel wave or buying a pair of gloves. He was quite easy. Indeed, once or twice I thought perhaps he had fallen asleep. We moved with the ease of a stout man who has stepped on the children's sled track.

"I am convinced I shall never write a lot in the air. There is too much to see. But I did keep a record on the tiny desk in front of me. Here is the log in full:

"At 12:50—Just hopped off.

"At 1:15—Lost; I cannot find where we are on the map. The pilot seems to know, however.

"At 1:40—Have eaten my lunch. Sandwich poor. Shall I throw over the banana skin or not?

"At 1:50—Have put the banana skin in my pocket. Airplaners must have good manners.

"At 2—Have just passed a note to the pilot, asking if he is sure he has enough gas. He has.

"At 2:15—Very lovely below. All the land is brown and the sea deep blue. The white surf lines do not seem to move.

"At 2:25—Masses of white clouds below us. Some drops of moisture on my face. Heavens, are we boiling? Do aeroplanes boil?

"At 2:45—Almost over. Sorry. It has been wonderful. The landing place looks rather small.

"I intend to have an aeroplane of my own soon, a nice tame one, that will play around the yard and let the children pet it. And on the rack in front of my seat in it I shall put a bottle of sunburn lotion"—so the delightful flying author expresses herself on flying. It does appear that she may easily realize her dream, since money is reported to flow toward her from every direction.

"Life was very good to me at the beginning," says Mrs. Rinehart. "It gave me a strong body, and it gave me sons before it gave me my work. I was almost fiercely a mother. I learned to use a typewriter with my two forefingers and a baby on my knee.

"I am frankly a story teller. Some day I may be a novelist. As a story teller I have had a certain popularity. To those friends and supporters of mine scattered all over the world I have an overwhelming sense of obligation. They look to me for certain things, and I must not fail them. I must not disappoint them."

THE INCOMPATIBLES—A French Story

Translated by William L. McPherson

Here is a clever story with a sting of satiric humor. It is a little venture in feminine psychology, conducted with delicacy and a real mastery of literary form.

TALL, elegant, charming in her morning costume, with a confident step—the step of a woman who knows that she is well dressed—Hélène turned into the Place de l'Etoile.

For a second she halted, in doubt, at the corner of the Avenue Friedland. Should she, going downtown, take the metro or the tramway? The metro would be faster. But scarcely was she engulfed in the hideous stairway when a mob of outcoming travelers surrounded her and pinned her fast against the rail. The tassel of her sunshade got tangled up with the umbrella of a crusty old lady. Her hat was disarranged. A stout gentleman, who apologized very courteously, stepped on her foot. But nothing upset her good humor. She smiled mildly at men and things, her spirit calm, her heart at peace. If the agonizing thought of the men who fought did not torment her, she would be perfectly happy.

Installed presently in a compartment of the train, she reflected.

"I shall bring home a pâté. The famous pâté which I discovered the other day. It will be served with a vegetable salad. That is, if the cook understood me. A vegetable salad. To make sure, I shall telephone her from a postal station."

She reflected some more.

"Am I going to be able to match that flowered muslin? Sapristi! Will I forget again the bottle of toilet water, the haircloth glove and the lip rouge?"

Ten things of equal importance preoccupied her mind; and this suddenly outweighed all the others:

"My nose is shiny."

She drew out of a little leather bag a tiny powdered handkerchief and a small mirror, framed in clear ottoman. The shine removed, the mirror and the handkerchief returned to the bag, she sat with her eyes fixed, again intensely thoughtful.

"Who would have said, six years ago, that one day the hours would run for me as smoothly as they do now; that no tiff the next minute would cloud my heart and brain and set my nerves a-tingling; that I could be sure that he, whom I await every evening, would offer me a warmth of tenderness devoid of jealousies and irritations? Whatever may be his burdens as a man of science, facing a thousand demands (and a brusque word or an impatient gesture would be excusable on his part), his voice, when I appear, becomes as ingratiating as his look. His face clears and to soothe his annoyances it suffices that I pass my hand softly over his worried brow. My presence restores his faith and courage. It matters little what words I use, even if they are commonplace or awkward. What do words count when he can read my thoughts?

"What a difference there was with the other one! That awful impossibility of understanding each other from which we suffered! How did I escape going mad under that régime of continual exasperation, of perpetual constraint? How could I have endured so long a man so externally excited; whose execrable character would have enraged a saint; who in two hours could find ten puerile excuses for engaging in recriminations? Heat oppressed him, cold irritated him, the promenaders who walked ahead of him annoyed him. In an auto it was another song. The roads were impracticable; the chauffeur didn't know how to drive; the tires were surely going to burst; the dust blinded him.

"Noise made him nervous; silence mad him sad. And with all this a morbid susceptibility to anything which concerned himself—himself, who never was troubled by the thought of giving pain to another, even to one who was dear to him. Always he had on the tip of his tongue not only the rude word, which is pardonable, but the cruel word which rankles and poisons.

"And to say that I loved that intolerable being passionately, more than I love my admirable companion of to-day! And he loved me, too. Of that I am certain. What woman has he since made unhappy? I have never wanted any one to mention his name to me. What has become of him? Because of a slight infirmity he couldn't go to the front. He must have traveled a good deal. His fortune permits it. Has he married, too? If so, I hope that he has found his master—some harpy, as much of a brawler as he is, able to hold her own against him, to reply to his excesses with worse insults, to wound him in his self-love, to humble his pride, bold enough to confront him with all his faults."

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Suddenly Hélène grew rigid, her eyes staring with astonishment. The man of whom she had been thinking, whom she had not seen for six years, had entered the compartment. A tall woman, a little heavy, but pretty and elegant, accompanied him. He held her arm affectionately and they both supported themselves on the back of a seat, their faces turned away from her.

"He'll be stamping on the floor in a minute," she thought.

But no; indifferent to the noise and the pitching of the train, he listened smilingly to the babbling conversation of his companion. She was teasing him.

"You are furious, aren't you?" she said.

He answered in a calm voice:

"Frightfully so."

Then they set to talking in whispers.

They got out at the Place de l'Opéra. Hélène walked a little behind them. The young woman said:

"Come with me and select a veil—a veil that will go with my rose colored toque. Does that bore you?"

"Not at all. I am free until 5 o'clock."

"Oh, then, you can go with me to the antiquity shop. It is becoming a disease—my rage for collecting little vases of the Louis Philippe period."

He answered, placidly:

"I don't know anything uglier than they are. But if it amuses you!"

Taking his companion by the arm, he enveloped her with his affectionate glances.

"Surely he was more affectionate than amorous," said Hélène to herself.

Troubled, she recalled the intonation of his voice, his look of desperation, when he used to say to her, in the minutes when he was sincerely tender:

"What a curse it is that we do not understand each other! Never shall I love another woman as I love you. And you, in spite of our infernal disagreements—could you ever love another man as you love me? Ah, if you would only try not to take so tragically every single word I say and every single gesture I make!"

There had never been any balance in their relations. Either they had remained, face to face, hostile, each ready to tear the other's heart out, or they were merely two lovers completely infatuated with each other.

No, certainly, the couple which she saw ahead of her were not ardent lovers. They were friends. The relation between them was like that which existed on her side, between herself and the man who cherished her.

"Yes," she said, "love, absolute love, with its accompaniment of fears, aggravated susceptibilities, jealousies and torments—that is the most violent dissolvent of happiness."

Hastening her steps and fleeing from the sight of the couple, who now caused her an invincible annoyance, she thought again:

"Perhaps it is less a case of bad characters than of bad temperaments. That man, who seemed to me abominable—has he not made another woman happy? And I, with another—am I not also happy?"

She caught herself repeating it, half aloud:

"Am I not also happy?"

Then, as if to chase away a shadow, she said to herself:

"It is curious. Seeing him again has not had the slightest effect on me. Not the slightest."

But that evening she returned home, having forgotten all her commissions—the pâté, the haircloth glove and everything else, even the lip rouge.

She returned home, her head heavy and her eyes red.